

“ALL MIGHT BECOME SUCH AS I AM”

Acts 25:1–26:32

Key Verse: 26:29

“And Paul said, ‘Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.’”

Do you ever struggle with envy? Some people seem to have it all. They’ve got “the riz,” “the flex,” “the goals,” “the main character energy.” And they’re so “post-economic,” “living the dream.” Today Paul encounters people something like that, opposite to his own condition in chains. Yet he’s not jealous of them in the least. Instead, *he* has something to offer *them*. What’s his secret? What gives a person in humble circumstances like Paul’s such an abundance to give? Paul is a man in Christ. To be in Christ is far better than having anything in this world. How can we have this assurance? How can we share it with those who seem self-sufficient and unreceptive? May God speak to us through his word.

Chapter 25 sets the stage for chapter 26. There’s a new Roman governor of Judea, Festus. He visits Jerusalem to make a relationship with the Jews. But they push him to bring Paul here to Jerusalem to stand trial, and they’re planning to kill him on the way. Festus declines and tells them to come to Caesarea (1–5). As soon as he himself gets back there, Festus calls for Paul. Again the Jews bring many serious charges against him they don’t even bother to prove. Paul simply says he’s committed no crime against the Law, the temple, or Caesar. But Festus, eager to please these Jews, suggests Paul stand trial in Jerusalem. Paul realizes this may be his only chance to get out of here. So, as a Roman citizen, he appeals directly to Caesar. After conferring with his council, Festus agrees (6–12). So God’s plan to send Paul to Rome advances one step further.

But Festus has a dilemma; he’s got to send Paul with a letter about his case, but he’s not even clear what the charges are. Paul isn’t guilty of any crime; he’s just in conflict with Jewish leadership, which Festus can’t comprehend. So, when King Agrippa and his sister Bernice arrive to pay their respects, Festus seizes the opportunity to explain his situation and asks their help. Agrippa, with a personal desire to hear Paul himself, prompts Festus to arrange a grand reception for him and his wife the very next day, an event to which all the local “big wigs” have already been invited, making it quite the occasion (13–22).

Read verse 23. The phrase “with great pomp” means “with much display, pageantry, and imagination.” It’s sort of like today’s Paris fashion runway. This reception is the place to see and be seen. People have been preparing for days, donning their finest wardrobes, hairstyles and jewelry. Their elegant looks have to display Roman authority and hierarchy and represent the Emperor. They wear purple togas and have bodyguards carrying weapons. The royals wear gold and

are followed by advisors and servants. The military men are in full dress armor, their helmets polished and breastplates gleaming. They all make a grand entrance, to impress and intimidate. Frankly, it's all pretty hollow. Paul is then brought into the room. Festus begins by publicly asking Agrippa's help, to find what to write about Paul in his cover letter (24–27). It's a weird situation. At a fancy reception, they're all about to listen to a curious prisoner. What happens?

Paul begins by saying he's grateful he's speaking to King Agrippa, who's familiar with the Jewish context (26:1–3). Then he begins his personal story. It's the third time in Acts Paul's conversion is described. Besides the coming of the Holy Spirit, the conversion of Saul, the former Pharisee, into Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, is *the* monumental event of Acts. It brought the gospel of Jesus outside of Judaism to the rest of the world. Earlier in Jerusalem, Paul shared his story with the hostile Jews (22:1–21). At that time he emphasized his impeccable Jewish credentials and how Ananias, a devout Jew, helped him. But in this account, he's addressing King Agrippa, who grew up in Rome and was aware of the bigger world. What does Paul say to him and the rest of this audience?

First he mentions that he grew up the strictest Pharisee (5). Then, in verses 6–7 he mentions the Jewish “hope” three times. As a Pharisee Paul had been holding onto this hope all his life, long before he became a Christian; it's not a new idea. So, what is this hope? Read verse 8. We can see this resurrection hope in the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah predicted that one day believers would confess: “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead” (Isa.26:19).¹ At this reception, the resurrection is the furthest thing from these people's minds. And Paul knows it sounds ridiculous to them. But he asks: why is it incredible that God the Creator raises the dead?

Then he describes his life as a persecutor. He was convinced he should oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth (9). But why, after just mentioning the resurrection, does he suddenly bring up Jesus of Nazareth? It's simple: because Christians were telling others *Jesus has risen*. And the Jewish leaders really didn't like that, because they'd had him crucified. Paul was probably the fiercest persecutor of Christians (10–11). But on a journey to Damascus, something happened: he met the Risen Jesus in person (13–15). Only here does Paul add what else Jesus told him at that moment. Jesus said to him, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” This was a well-known Greek proverb, familiar to those listening to Paul. A goad was a stick used to get an ox or bull to go in the right direction. If the animal stubbornly kicked against it, it would only hurt itself. In modern terms, Paul had been banging his own head against the wall. In his self-righteous zeal and hard work to eradicate Christians, he'd been so wrong. Jesus saw even this enemy with compassion. And he changed him.

¹ See also Job 19:25–27; Dan.12:2.

Paul gives the most detailed summary in Acts of the gospel commission he received (16–18). Paul's commissioning was very special and unique. But essentially, it gave him new life in Christ,² an example for all believers of all time. Paul's grace and mission is the grace and mission of every believer (Rom.1:5). So, what does Paul's commissioning teach us about being in Christ?

Read verse 16. *Here, being in Christ means being his servant and witness.* By his one-sided grace, Jesus appointed Saul, his enemy, to be Paul, his servant and witness (1:8). He became his "chosen instrument" (9:15). This is Paul's new identity, by the grace of Jesus alone. His life is now based on this new identity in Christ as his servant and witness. Unlike his former life, he doesn't have to perform to earn something. He just enjoys this truth: in Christ he's no longer a servant of sin; he's a servant and witness of Jesus.

Read verse 18. *Being in Christ means being transformed by his grace.* This verse specifies what Paul is supposed to do. But it also describes Paul himself, before he encountered Jesus. His self-righteous eyes were spiritually blind. He was outwardly pure, but inwardly in darkness, hatred and guilt. He thought he was serving God, but he was under the power of Satan, who was using him. But when he turned to the light of Jesus, Paul received forgiveness. He was set free from his anger and pride by the power of God. He could share this grace with people because he experienced it himself. The grace of Jesus gave him deep and lasting purpose. Now, even in chains, he's sharing this grace with King Agrippa. Being in Christ means being truly changed by his grace.

Read verse 18 again. *Being in Christ also means being sanctified by faith.* In the light of the Risen Jesus, Paul's eyes were opened not only to his grace, but also to our living hope in Christ. What is this hope? Paul describes it as "a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." By faith in Jesus, Paul now has a secure inheritance and full membership among God's holy people. He didn't deserve to be among those he persecuted. His hands were stained by the blood of martyrs he wanted to shed. But now, he truly belongs among them, not only in this world, but forever in the eternal kingdom of God, because he's been sanctified by faith in Jesus. Because he's personally experienced sanctification by faith, and living hope, he's well-prepared to share this new reality with Gentiles, who are full of sin and far away from God. Throughout his ministry Paul shared this gospel hope. In a letter he wrote, "...having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints..." (Eph.1:18). Having our eyes opened to this hope, this rich and glorious inheritance in the saints, is far greater than earthly riches or even the highest positions of honor and glory. Actually, all people need this hope of sanctification and true belonging. How can

² E.g. new identity: 2 Cor.5:17; Gal.2:20; Col.3:3; free from condemnation: Rom.8:1; Phil.3:9; 1 Cor.1:30; united in his death & resurrection: Rom.6:3–4; Eph.2:5–6; new purpose & power: Eph.2:10; Phil.4:13.

they have it? We need not to be hiding in a holy huddle of self-preservation, staying only with people like us. We need to get out into the real world and share the good news of sanctification and living hope in Christ, especially with those far from God. Being in Christ means sharing with people in darkness this hope of sanctification and belonging. Are we really doing this?

Look at verse 19. *Being in Christ means being obedient to the heavenly vision.* Paul wasn't doing his own thing; he was obeying God. He went where Jesus wanted him to go (20a; 1:8). He told people what Jesus wanted him to, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance (20b). It's this message of repentance that made the Jews so mad at Paul (21). But through his obedience to God's vision, so many came to saving faith in Jesus. All those in Christ obey the heavenly vision and give this gospel of real life repentance to all kinds of people.

Read verses 22–23. *Finally, being in Christ means proclaiming his light.* Paul's message of light came straight out of the Law and the Prophets (Luke 24:26–27,44–49). But the light of Christ is for all people, Jew and Gentile, small and great. Even to this audience, Paul proclaims the light of Jesus. He's sure the light of Jesus can change even the darkest person. Today our world is so dark, it's scary. It can make us shrink back and just try to maintain what we have. But in Christ we don't hide: we go right in to the darkness and proclaim the light of Jesus to people. Let's each focus on shining his light to even one lost person.

The gospel light of Jesus gets a real reaction here. Read verse 24. Why does Governor Festus suddenly start shouting? He sees Paul is brilliant and articulate. But he thinks the resurrection is irrational. He's wondering, "How can such an intelligent man believe something so crazy?" He concludes Paul's intense study of religious texts has driven him out of his mind. But really he's trying to dismiss the gospel. Paul calmly tells him, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words" (25).

Then he turns to Agrippa and says, "For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe" (26–27). Right there in public he begins discussing Agrippa's personal faith. Paul is no longer defending himself; he's the one asking the question. He wants to help even this king. It's what Jesus told him he'd do (9:15). Actually, it's what Jesus calls all of us to do (Luke 21:12). Are we talking to king-like people about faith in Jesus with Paul's boldness? By mentioning Agrippa's faith in the prophets, Paul is building common ground. By mentioning how Agrippa's been watching the Christian movement, he's trying to help him get off the fence and make a decision, even right there in front of everyone. Accepting the truth of the gospel gives anyone such a courage decision. Put on the spot, what does Agrippa do? He says to

Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” (28) He’s evasive. As king of Judea, committing to Christ would upset lots of people. He’s comfortable in his position and lifestyle. Paul can see that in his mind, Agrippa is *almost* there, but in practice he just can’t commit. Are any of us here like him?

How does Paul respond? Read verse 29. The phrase “I would to God” is Old English that means, “I sincerely pray.” Who is Paul praying for? He says, “...not only you but also all who hear me this day...” It’s all these dignitaries, and all their servants. Paul believes the words of the gospel are “living and active,” “sharper than a two-edged sword,” able to penetrate into any sinner’s heart and lead him or her to repentance (Heb.4:12). He trusts that the word of God and the Spirit of God can work in any place, among any people, if it’s spoken clearly.

Paul’s not just trying to win a debate. His sincere prayer is that “all who hear me this day might become such as I am.” These words are the climax of his testimony and of all his preaching. They might be the most beautiful words ever spoken. Paul has been in prison for years. He’s poor, despised, and accused. Through repeated floggings he bears on his body the marks of Jesus (Gal.6:17; 2 Cor.11:23–25). He’s in contrast to these high and lofty people living in the limelight, living the soft life. In compassion Paul says he’s got the way better life. Why? Is it because he’s an ascetic? No, it’s because he has Jesus. He’s got “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (Phil.3:8). By his grace he loves Jesus and “rejoices with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Pet.1:8). When we come to know Jesus, we do a radical re-assessment of life. What do we value? Achievements? Reputation? Possessions? Our own righteousness? The Holy Spirit shows us that knowing Jesus is far superior to any of these.

One of UBF’s founders, Sarah Barry, met Jesus when she was in college. She came from an affluent Southern family and could have lived an easy life. But when she came to know Jesus, she gave her life to him. She left her life of privilege and lived as an incarnational missionary to the people of Korea, especially university students. She prayed to raise spiritual leaders from among them for the world. She was so dedicated to the gospel work, she missed the chance to marry. But God gave her Jesus as her greatest treasure. And she brought the riches of Christ to so many people, all around the world.

One more comment on Paul’s words in verse 29. With these rulers and prominent people, Paul is not critical, sarcastic, or cynical. As a man in Christ, he’s full of the spirit of grace and love for them, too. He longs for them to have this new identity, purpose, hope and light. It’s available to both small and great.

May God forgive our secret envy of the world, and our judgmental, critical minds. Are you sure of who you are in Christ? Do you have compassion and sincerely pray for those who seem to have it all? Read verse 29 again. May God help us truly live in Christ, and pray and share his light with those in darkness.